CROSSING THE TIGRIS AT MIDNIGHT

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This is the story of how to smuggle an inflatable boat across Syria to the north bank of the Tigris. It was not easy. The illegal crossing had to take place at a strange place where the borders of Syria, Turkey and Iraq meet, the imaginary lines intersecting out in the muddy snowmelt water that rushes southeast toward Mosul and then on toward Baghdad. Countries are paired up at the river. Syria and Saddam- controlled Iraq on the near side, Turkey and Kurdistan on the opposite bank. Turkey is just upstream from Kurdistan, and at the intersection all the government soldiers are bunched up, the opposing forces in an orgy of mutual surveillance.

Since arriving in Syria more than a week ago, I had tried everything to get into Iraq, including a quick trip from Qamishli in the northeast corner of the country down to Damascus to ask the Iraqis themselves for a visa. On Monday, March 10, the day I arrived at the Iraqi Embassy, the United States was lobbying a large number of countries around the world to eject Iraqi officials. Men were moving around the building quickly, speaking in urgent tones. An Iraqi asked me to leave the main visa section that was crowded with old people with passport problems and directed me to the embassy gates. A lock buzzed and I walked through into the interior of the building. Inside, a guard watched an impressive array of video monitors, which had views from every corner of the building cycling every few seconds. After a few minutes, an English-speaking Iraqi diplomat appeared and ushered the special visa cases into a room inside the embassy. There were two other

applicants, a photographer from the U.K. and a young man wearing a white skullcap.

The Iraqis usually sit on press visas for two weeks and route the request through the information ministry in Baghdad, but peace protesters get them the same day. The thought of getting a visa in a single day had haunted me, particularly after the bureaucratic problems with the Syrian secret police, who had denied me permission to cross the river into Iraqi Kurdistan. In the end the temptation of a quick visa was too great, so I made up a story the Iraqis might buy.

Mr. Safah, the English-speaking diplomat, was so turned on by the thought that an American would walk in off the street and ask to be placed in an Iraqi installation that he asked me three times. “Are you sure you are not interested in being a human shield?” I raised my hands and said, “I’m so sorry,” I said it as if it was something I would do if it were even remotely possible. Then Safah asked me if I was a journalist. “Absolutely not,” I said. The lie shot out like a mouse. I said I was a peace protester and wanted to visit Iraq to meet up with some friends in a peace group, and the lie bent back on itself, became more complicated, and required a host of details to fill gaps in the story. The telling of it felt rickety and unsupportable, but it just kept on coming. It wasn’t smart to mention any names of people I knew in Baghdad, and I drifted into the land of bad liars. I told the official that I was an independent protester. Safah then wanted to the know names and addresses of friends in Baghdad. Surely I had some, he said. There was a pause.

Safah leaned in close and explained that I could go that very day if I agreed to be a human shield. “You can get the visa today, no problem,” he went on. “You can be there tonight.” I thought he meant that the Iraqi government would pay for the trip. He seemed anxious, perhaps because he had suffered

a dispiriting exodus of human shields out of Iraq in recent days and needed to up the count a little. “No human shield?” he wanted to know for the last time. “Now, please write down your reasons for going to Iraq.” We sat and wrote under the buzzing fluorescent lights and a giant portrait of Saddam. I wrote a vague and hopeful paragraph about peace in careful block print, then signed and dated it.

Saddam’s oversize wall portrait blurred and shuddered into an image of an authoritarian principal from childhood named Mr. Knee. Safah then took my letter and looked it over and said, “I’m so sorry. I can’t read this very well. Will you read this out loud for me please?” I read the statement for the small audience, and it was hopeful and vague and didn’t say much at all. Seemingly satisfied that I’d made some sort of quasi-public declaration, Safah took the page and left the room for an hour. The special cases sat in silence while Mr. Knee scrutinized the room through the dead air for weaklings and dissenters. It was hard to breathe.

The British journalist said when we were left alone that the human shields could do anything they wanted during the day, but had to sleep in an Iraqi installation at night. Then Safah came back in with forms and we wrote down our passport particulars.

Across from me sat the religious man from Yemen who was also in our special visa group. The Iraqis dealt with the Westerners first and saved his case for later. The man in the white skullcap sat through the whole process looking meek and distracted. An older friend sat with him to make sure the deal with the Iraqis went smoothly, answering for him when Safah asked a question. I had the feeling the young man was being put up to it, but all the negotiations for his trip to Iraq were being conducted in Arabic, and the officials spoke very quickly and asked him to wait. They had wanted to talk to us first. A fat official then came into the room and read a long list of names

over and over again, turning pages at regular intervals. When he reached the end of his list of names, he started over.

Jean-Paul Sartre, the French existentialist philosopher, wrote plays that emitted the same feeling as the embassy waiting room, a dreadful machine whose moving parts were human.

After we had filled out our forms, Safah reappeared and said that he would contact us. This was our cue to leave. Since I didn't have the telephone number for my hotel, only the name, I said that they might have a hard time finding me. "Just tell us the name, we can find all that out," he said. I left certain that they would do some digging, perhaps do the obvious search on the Internet. The next morning, as I was drinking bitter coffee in the Hotel Sultan, Safah called and said the visa had fallen through. He said he was sorry.

The Iraqi visa scam was the last legal approach I had for traveling to Kurdistan. With war seeming more imminent by the day, all the surrounding countries were closed. Stealing the ferry or finding a boat were the only plans I could come up with that made sense. I chose the boat. The ferry was too close to the police.

The day before I left for Damascus and the Iraqi embassy, I drove around northeastern Syria with an odd man named Abu Baasir. He is the Qamishli town gombeen, the man everybody knows and no one takes seriously. Abu Baasir speaks English passably well, probably from his old days as a Syrian mukhabarat agent, but since it is nearly impossible to hire a translator in Syria, I was stuck with him. I met many people who spoke English well, but no one would take the job, and it took a few days for me to realize that this was another manifestation of the police state -- the secret police

must authorize a translator, the state must give its blessing. Anything else is suspect.

Another point in Abu Baasir's favor is that he was always hanging around in front of the hotel, talking to the kids who waited for shoeshine jobs. Abu Baasir had time on his hands. A marginal man, his career had spun out long ago and he now lived with his mother.

I had run into him on the street one day when he tried to sell me a car ride to the ruins at Ain Diwar. I told him that it was important that he get me to a nearby town called Sheikh Amad, where I suspected somebody might have a boat for crossing the Tigris. What do you want to do there? he wanted to know. I want to go fishing in a boat, Abu Baasir, that's what I want to do, I explained. We had trouble finding the place. Abu Baasir reclined in the back seat, his hair slicked back and a gold charm around his neck. It had a small section of the Koran inscribed on its face.

On the map, Sheikh Amad sits next to an inviting lake, a blue oblong that cries out for fishing. So why not drive down to Sheikh Amad and search for boats? We drove all day, while Abu Baasir gave me his philosophy on life, a clutch of random observations. "Gentleman, let me tell you one thing, and that is that the mukhabarat in Syria know everything," he returned to the theme of the secret police.

I tell him that there is no way they can know everything that people do. It's just not possible. "Yes, in Syria they do, gentleman. I know this for a fact." Abu Baasir croaked out more advice from the back seat of the cab, his stream of weird Syrian facts. Wheat fields rolled past the windows. The land was flat, broken only by isolated hills topped by graves. Our cab got its wheels stuck in the rich mud near a madrassa town built by Saudi money at Tal

Maruf. A mob of religious students told us to turn the car around and leave the village.

We drove past two identical houses under construction for the local mullah. The mullah's houses were the tallest structures around for miles, including the mosque. Abu Baasir said that the rich mullah of Tal Maruf was lucky to enjoy two paradises, an earthly paradise in his grand houses and a second in the afterlife.

When we arrived at Sheikh Amad, a Bedouin farmer told us that the lake was missing. It had evaporated. Worse, there were never any boats at all. The Bedouin walked over and brought us soft flat bread before we drive away, which we put on the arm rests of the cab so it would spread out in the sun. From Sheikh Amad we drove another few hours to Malkiye, a town close to the Tigris. We were looking for a boat in a cultivated desert, and finding one in this corner of Syria was impossible, a fool's errand. Syrians, both Christians and Kurds, were either suspicious or didn't know the answer, and the local authorities were becoming interested in the foreigner who didn't have the good sense to relocate. Boats are forbidden on the Tigris between Turkey and Syria, so even mentioning the smuggling plot was dangerous. A few days earlier, a Baath Party lady told me to leave town, saying there was no reason for me to stay. "There is nothing for you here. Why don't you go back to Damascus," she suggested.

In Malkiye, a small town near the river, we found an old Christian man who liked to fish, and I finally came clean with him and said I needed to buy a boat to smuggle myself across to Kurdistan. We were surrounded by locals and I hated having to say it in public. It was a mistake. When the men heard the plan, they burst into laughter, and they laughed for a long time. One man danced around the small storefront with an make-believe oar as a joke. The

old man said I could use a toy raft if it meant that much to me. The men laughed even harder.

The fact was, I was in the wrong place. Syria has a stretch of Mediterranean coast and a major port at Lattakia, and though that was more 400 miles west of the place where I wanted to enter Kurdistan, I took my last chance and went there via Damascus. In Lattakia, the boyhood home of the late Syrian President Hafez Al-Assad, a friend picked me up from the hotel and then took me straight to the local chandlery. It was a small store heaped with nets and nylon rope run by a cantankerous old guy who didn't have time for tourists. In the window was a box with a picture of an inflatable two-man rowboat on it. Not too heavy, easy to hide. And it came with a pump and plastic oars. My friend translated my question into Arabic: "How much do you want for it?" The old man sold it to me at a fair price.

My friend drove me down a steep cliff road to the sea, where we unpacked the rowboat for its maiden voyage. Lattakians watched us from the cliff while N. hunched over the air pump until the boat no longer looked like a shriveled skin. It took shape and became a proper form of transportation in a mere minutes, a mundane transformation anywhere else but Syria. I did a jig in celebration.

Above us in an old seaside cafe, men sat smoking nargileh water pipes and drinking tea.

We carried the new boat, which smelled strongly like plastic, and put it in the water, and I climbed in and tried to get a feel for the oars. As the boat moved away from the shore, N. became a small figure, and soon there was only the sea and the soft air and the ships on the horizon. I rowed until my shoulders and hands burned and the boat flew in a straight line over the warm blue-green water of the Mediterranean.

I left the next morning for the Qamishli, the eastern border post. I had to cover the distance of 400-plus miles again, this time traveling by bus with my new boat rolled up and hidden in a cheap suitcase. The plastic oars bothered me. Even a Syrian cop could figure out what they were for, and they were easy to find in the satchel. The problem was that bus stations are closed police checkpoints where everything is haphazardly searched, especially foreigners. Once you're inside the station, there's no way out. The gates are immediately shut, and the police have the passengers at their mercy and can inspect and prod away at their leisure.

I wasn't even out of the Lattakia station before I was confronted with my first test. I was one of the only passengers traveling so early in the morning, and all of a sudden the Syrian official was by my side making searching motions. He searched the luggage of the man I was speaking to and then he searched the duffel with the boat in it -- and promptly pulled out an oar. The cop then put the oar nicely back in the bag.

Later, as I was changing buses in Aleppo, I was quickly arrested after telling the authorities I was a friend of Bill Clinton's -- but I was just as quickly released. A beautiful moment came and went as the station officials, bus drivers and other random onlookers heaped praises on an American president. Then the police found the boat again. The first cop put the oars back in their place and never asked me what I was doing with such a thing heading for the border. The commanding officer signaled for me to wait, so he could find the special permission stamp for Qamishli. He grinned as he stamped the ticket. Clinton's Herculean efforts at peace in the Middle East did not go unnoticed in Syria, and the mere mention of his name made things suddenly right, a Get Out of Jail Free card.

Seven hours and an uneventful ride later, the cops weren't around in the Qamishli station. It was a small victory, and it was easy to get to a cheap hotel with the boat and get ready for the river crossing the next afternoon.

On Friday, March 14, a cabbie picked me up at the hotel thinking that I was going to Turkey. When we were in the car, I told him the truth: I was headed to the Tigris River crossing. We headed east out of town, then stopped at a cafe. There, I drew him a diagram that showed how I needed him to drive through the border checkpoints and drop me off half a mile short of the secret-police station at the water. The driver, a Kurd, wanted to know if I was going to swim; he asked if I had a wife and a family. He worried about the authorities and he thought that I was going to taint him with some bad foreigner luck, and it took a long time to persuade him to take me to the river. I explained that I had a boat and that the Syrians would never see me.

The driver took a minute to think about it and finally agreed, then looked sadly at the diagram. We drove through the late afternoon sun toward the Tigris, then through the first checkpoint, which was manned by a teenager who chased after us and forced us to stop the car. The driver spoke to him in Kurdish and he let us through. We rolled through the second checkpoint, past the green wheat fields and Bedouin farmers, until we found a place that had a deep ravine near the road. I asked him to stop the car. At the top of the hill, the driver let me out and waved goodbye. The river was half a mile from the crest, the ferry crossing to Kurdistan just to the north, and on the south side was the Iraqi border, marked by a mining operation. The plan was to get the boat in the Tigris between those boundaries.

Carrying the gear, I dropped down into the ravine and found a bush where I could park the duffels and look for a better place to hide until nightfall, when there was less chance of being found out. Up on the ridge overlooking Iraq was a blade of sedimentary rock about three-quarters of my length. It was

brown like the bark of a redwood tree, and small creatures were entombed inside it. With my knees pulled up, people couldn't see me from the road, and I waited. I looked at the sky for an hour. Flights of birds flew overhead. A farmer drove his tractor back and forth over his field, and the day went on slowly until the light failed and the moon lit a sheet of clouds. When I could move around, I went back to the bush with the gear and slept in the long grass, waking to a frog chorus. A mouse lived in the bush and made rustling noises when I was still.

From 8 until 10 that night, a steady stream of expensive SUVs came from the direction of the Iraqi border. I couldn't move to see which road they had taken, but the only other road from the river was a dead end at the ferry.

At 11, the traffic stopped and there hadn't been another car on the road for an hour. It was time to go, and I walked up and out of the ravine to the asphalt track that went down to the ferry landing. The road was still dangerous that late, and if a Syrian had seen a man walking with luggage, they either would have stopped to give him a lift or they would have immediately taken him to the police. If the cops had found me, they would treat the river business as espionage and ask unfriendly questions. I left the road and walked over a field to a ridge. Past this ridge was a steep cliff and the Tigris. As I neared the river, a sound came up from the banks, a jet engine noise. It was the river rushing past rocks, fed by melting snow in southern Turkey, and it roiled and ran. This gave me a sour feeling in my stomach, because it was running much faster than I'd expected. Upstream there was white water. From the ridge, I looked for a place to get the boat in the river out of sight of the border posts.

There was a notch cut in the riverbank by a stream, a V-shaped cut, as if someone had struck it with an ax. I inflated the boat and reminded myself to stay off the south bank of the river, to avoid Iraqi soldiers. If I landed in

the wrong spot, the plan was to immediately get back in the river and try again. On the opposite bank, the Turkish encampment looked like a floodlit fast-food place. The border forces were half a mile upstream and needed to get lucky to hit a man in that river at night.

Once the gear was in the boat, I rowed out into the Tigris and was caught in a fast current that sent the boat toward an outcropping on my right, the Saddam-controlled side. After the fast water was a calm stretch, where the boat handled well and made good progress. The Syrian and Iraqi bank was a great black shape, and the boat moved away from it toward the Kurdish side. I ran aground on the north side of the river and hauled the gear out. I pulled the boat on the riverbank and slept in it until morning.

At daybreak, I found a man driving a battered German dump truck and I asked him what country we were in. He said, “Kurdistan,” raised his fist in a victory sign, and pulled me into his cab where it was warm. Farsad and his brother Kamran, the truckers, drove me all the way to Dohuk, several hours away. At every checkpoint, the Peshmerga militia welcomed us and waved us through. ■